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ABSTRACT

Refugees to the United States are fleeing intolerable conditions and arriving to a new, very unfamiliar environment with many possibilities and sometimes conflicting expectations. Some are able to focus on their new life; others experience significant psychological, emotional, and physical adjustment problems. English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers can develop helpful and supportive relationships with refugees struggling to cope with daily life, but can also be ready targets for displaced anger, disappointment, and frustration. ESL teachers may be called on to referee conflicts. ESL teachers may also feel ineffectual in the face of students' lack of progress or seeming disinterest, and feel powerless to effect change. Teachers may be able to refer students having more difficulties than expected to resettlement mental health services. If the community has not addressed the concerns of refugee mental health, it may be time to initiate the discussion. Working with refugee groups can be both highly rewarding and highly stressful. It is important to monitor ESL teachers' stress levels and emotional responses, be familiar with the ways they cope. Teachers should take the time to do a personal inventory and care for themselves, which is also good role modeling for students. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (MSE)

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Compass Points

Understanding Refugee Mental Health Concerns

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Understanding Refugee Mental Health Concerns

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As part of the ELT/TA training at IRIM in Chicago in February, Mary Fabri presented the following remarks:

Refugees are fleeing intolerable conditions. Their decision to leave their homelands is made in an effort to find a new life, if not for themselves, for their children. The decision rarely feels like a choice, but more like a must or an imposition. With a leap of faith, refugees get on the plane and fly to a new place of refuge with high expectations. Many begin to allow themselves to feel hope and begin to dream about new possibilities for an unknown future. Many have no idea what the United States will really be like. They remember images from movies, stories about a friend's friend who started his own business, money they witnessed tourists freely spending. So many possibilities.

Then the refugees are greeted at the airport. Realities begin to set in. They are resettled in apartments in big cities, even though they came from a rural area. They are sponsored by church groups and given homes in small communities, yet they came from a big, bustling city. They are ready to talk about what they expect from American, from us, but instead they are placed in orientations that explain what is expected of them: time limits for public assistance, ESL classes, employment requirements. It can be overwhelming. This is not what they expected. Doubts begin to surface. Is America a good place to be?

For some refugees, the guidelines and structure of resettlement requirements give them a focus on how to obtain their new life. For others, all the emotions that have been pushed aside in order to survive begin to flood their awareness. Some refugees begin to have difficulty sleeping, perhaps having nightmares with content of a horrible event they witnessed. Some also begin experiencing depressive symptoms: crying, feeling hopeless and/or helpless, isolating themselves, avoiding any kind of social interaction, being unable to sustain their attention or maintain their concentration, becoming irritable, and in some cases angry and explosive. Others develop symptoms related to anxiety: feeling their heart pounding in their chest as if it is going to explode, excessive perspiration, tingling and/or numbness in their bodies, tightness in their throat or chest, difficulty breathing and an overwhelming feeling of dread. There are some refugees that suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This includes the symptoms of depression and anxiety, but also results in avoiding situations that may remind them of traumatic events, having intrusive thoughts and memories of painful events that they are unable to put aside, and exaggerated startle responses to unexpected loud noises like a siren sounding or a book dropped on the floor. At times, a refugee with PTSD may have a flashback which is experienced as a reliving of a traumatic event as if it is actually occurring at the time it is remembered. A flashback is a total body experience of memory and it is very frightening for the refugees who find themselves having strong emotional reactions after arriving in the United States. America may begin to feel like a bad place. Many did not have these feelings and problems while in flight or in refugee camps. They were in survivor mode. Once in the United States, however, the security of resettlement can permit those painful emotions to be released. The feelings may be directed at America as a country, at the resettlement agency or public aid office as institutions, or at the resettlement worker or ESL teacher as people.

ESL teachers can have the most rewarding job. They may develop helpful and supportive relationships with a refugee struggling to learn a new language in order to navigate the daily activities of life. They can witness the improvement and change that transforms a new arrival to a proud resident of a new homeland.

ESL teachers can have the most difficult job. They may be the ready targets for displaced anger, disappointment, and frustration. They may be called on to be referees for conflicts between ethnicities. They may feel ineffectual as they see no advancement in a student's grasp of language. They can feel frustrated by a student's poor attendance and seeming disinterest due to poor attention while in class. They may feel powerless at times to effect any change in the life of a student's struggling with the difficult task of adjustment. There are times that an ESL teacher may identify a student that needs more help than their efforts can provide.

Many resettlement agencies have begun to address

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the issues of refugee mental health. If an ESL teacher has identified a student that appears to be having more difficulties than is usually expected or is creating more than the usual dissonance within the ESL teacher or in the classroom, he or she may contact the resettlement agency about possible referral of a student for mental health services. Social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health providers in some communities are developing ways to provide assistance to refugees with the help of interpreters. Refugee mental health is a special service and requires cultural sensitivity. If your community has not begun to address the concerns of refugee mental health, it may be the time to initiate that discussion.

Working with refugee groups can provide a rewarding experience. It can be full of observable advancements and adjustments. ESL teachers can see students improve. They witness the embarrassment and cautiousness in the first attempts to pronounce words and grasp language concepts. They witness the pride and excitement that accompanies the growing ability to communicate with others, something that was lost with the departure from homelands. Along with the rewards however, comes the stress of working with individuals who have suffered tremendously, have endured unimaginable hardships, and are grieving a litany of losses. Being open to the awareness of ESL teachers' personal reactions and responses to the information they learn, the stories they hear, and feelings and behaviors of the refugees that they interact with can have a profound effect on ESL teachers and others working with refugees. It is important to monitor the ESL teachers' stress levels and emotional responses, to be familiar with the ways they cope and with the ways that most effectively help the teachers cope. Teachers should take the time to do a personal inventory and take the time to take care of themselves. It provides good role modeling to the students who learn not only by listening, but also by observing.

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